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Why Jesus Loves Pokémon

John 20:19-31

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Fifty dollars, gone. Blown on a single schoolyard transaction, conducted clandestinely, behind the soccer field bleachers during lunch. His Dad was furious. A lot of bar mitzvah money blown on a pack of cardboard trading cards depicting mythical creatures with comical names.

"But, Dad, you don't understand," the West Los Angeles seventh-grader pleaded as he cracked open a binder with Pokémon cards and pulled out the bounty from his latest score. "It's Charizard, Dad! I got Charizard!"

Pikachu. Jigglypuff. Diglett. Alakazam. Weedle. There's a strong chance that these words don't mean anything to those of you over the age of thirteen. These words are *names*, the names of only three of the over 150 pocket monsters known in the singular or in the plural as Pokémon.

Do you remember Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles? Do you remember Transformers? Do you remember Power Rangers? Now we have Pokémon, little characters in a make-believe world that appear in video games, movies, a television show, but most importantly, in trading cards.

Within a month of its debut, the Pokémon television series became the highest rated children's show on the WB network. Nintendo sold 2.5 million Pokémon Game Boy cartridges in seven months, making it the fastest-selling product in company history. In just four months, 850,000 trading cards were sold in the United States, and kids began flocking to malls for trading bazaars. So preoccupied are kids with trading cards, some schools have banned them.

To be absolutely accurate with what I am sharing with you, I checked with a reliable source within the congregation and, yes, he is less than thirteen years old. Pokémon are cute and generally friendly little monsters who live in the wild and who, when caught, can be trained to fight for you in the effort to capture more of the little creatures. Or, they can simply be pets.

The goal of the main character, a boy by the name of Ash Ketchum, is to team with his own sometimes uncooperative Pokémon, a little yellow fellow named Pikachu, to become the greatest Pokémon trainer in the world. To do that, he must capture some of the more than 150 little monsters, and train them to capture others - that is, to multiple his own effectiveness.

Now, maybe it's a stretch to compare Ash Ketchum to Jesus Christ. But the kids within our congregation catch onto the strategy in an nanosecond, while the church is still trying (after two millennia) to get the concept. In the game, our children understand that to win you need to multiply yourself.

Jesus called it fishing for men. You could call Him, Jesus Ketchum, because 'ketching' them was what Jesus was all about. Catching disciples, catching people with Pokémon power or, better put, Pentecost power.

Judas was one wild Pokémon who got away. Thomas, the main Pokémon of today's scripture, wasn't too much help either. Jesus had hoped Thomas would be one of the Twelve who would multiply himself, become a trainer, a discipler of others who would disciple, and so forth. But it didn't happen. After the crucifixion, Thomas lost it. Although the other Pokémon tell him they have seen the Risen Lord, Thomas refuses to believe their story. "Unless I see the mark of the nails in his hands," he sputters, "and put my finger in the mark of the nails and my hand in his side, I will not believe." Thomas is defiant.

Of course, Thomas does get to see Jesus, and has the opportunity to do as he desires, and makes the celebrated statement of faith: 'My Lord and my God.' But it feels to me as if it's too little, too late. And Jesus as much as tells him so. And we never hear from Thomas again. Nada. Zip. Sure, tradition says he went East and established the church in India. But, truth is, Thomas opted for Pokémon Pet status rather than Power status. And *that* doesn't cut it.

It's fashionable to rehabilitate Thomas and make excuses. It's easy to feel sympathy for the dude whose name is now synonymous with doubt. Doubt, we know, can be a good thing. Frederick Buechner says doubt can be the 'ants in the pants of faith.' But this is a lame excuse for Thomas. All these efforts to rehabilitate Thomas are so five minutes ago, so yesterday. Fact is, Thomas turned out to be a Pet Pokémon. He blew it. Jesus Ketchum is warning us not to go there.

When Jesus captures us, it's not to be a pet, but a person 'imbued with power from on high.' He intends to turn us from monsters into messengers. We are likewise to capture others to do the same. Kids get it. The church needs to. Anything less makes us a dabbling doubter, a tentative Thomas, a passive pet.

When kids play the game, they use Pokémon trading cards which they trade with their friends. There are energy cards labeled fire, electricity, water. They negotiate moves, count the cost of each move and try to build the best and most powerful collection of cards to succeed at the game.

Take a hint from the Pokémon 'Vulpix' and begin with fire energy. The early church was nothing without Pentecost and the power of the Holy Spirit within *and* upon. If the church doesn't seek to recover this spiritual center, it morphs into a Pet church without power.

Another option might is to be like the Pokémon 'Horsea' and pour on your water energy, making the church into a loving, caring community - one that offers the water of life to spiritually thirsty neighbors, and then receives new members through the waters of baptism.

The alarming aspect of the Pokémon craze is the ferocity with which children (and their parents) engage in barely-civilized warfare to procure the best trading cards or the most complete set. It's mercenary aspect has turned carefree little boys into cutthroat junior day traders. Fourth-graders show up at school with wads of cash stuffed into their pockets, and second-graders are reduced to tears because the older, street-wise boys tricked them into parting with precious cards.

But in the broadest sense, Pokémon empowers kids because it is a whole deep, rich world just for them. They can learn and master it over time. The television show is about friendship, fair play, nurturing, and collecting. And in every episode, there's a

theme of going after what you believe in.

And *that*'s why Jesus love Pokémon. The reason that growth in the early church was so incredibly explosive was that Christians *began* evangelizing within their close circle close circle of family, friends and co-workers. New converts were then brought into house churches, where they were nurtured and encouraged. Evangelism was accomplished primarily through the household - through a New Testament household that included servants, servants' families, friends and even business associates.

Research indicates that evangelism is most effective when it is targeted at friends and associates. In a survey of 42,000 laypeople who developed relationships with Christ, over 75% of them became Christians through the witness of friends or relatives. At most, 2% responded to visitation programs, and less than 1% were inspired by evangelistic crusades or television programs, and only 6% credited a particular church program offering with bringing them to faith.

We are like Pokémon who have been captured by Jesus. We have been captured so that we can be trained to capture others, thus extending the work of Jesus. This is classic biblical Christianity. This is who we are supposed to be. The kids get it. There's no real reason why we can't get it too. So let's not make excuses for doubting Thomas, or for ourselves. We have *seen* the risen Lord! That's very, very good news. Let's get out there and capture some more Pokémon like ourselves.

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